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PROTAGORAS'
ORTHOEPEIA IN ARISTOPHANES'
"BATTLE OF THE PROLOGUES"

(Frogs 1119–97)

That Frogs 1119–97 draws upon the Sophists and especially upon Protagoras has often been recognized). The present paper proposes to show, however, that the influence of Protagoras here is more pervasive than most scholars have thought.

My starting point is a recent article by Detlev Fehling), who has plausibly suggested that Aristotle’s three discussions of Protagoras’ views on language (Rhet. 3. 1407 b 6 = DK 8 80 A 27;
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*Soph. El.* 14. 173 b 17 = DK 80 A 28; *Poet.* 19. 1456 b 15 = DK 80 A 29) all reflect a single original Protagorean context. Part at least of that context, Fehling suggests, may have run roughly as follows:

Poets, even the greatest poets, have undeserved reputations among the many. Look at the *Iliad* of Homer. Let me quote the opening lines. They are full of mistakes. For example, Homer means to pray for the Muse's favor; but, in fact, he issues a command, ἄειδε [DK 80 A 29]. Observe the word μηνίς. It should be masculine; anger is a masculine sentiment. But Homer makes it feminine [DK 80 A 28].

The "battle of the prologues" opens with Euripides' criticisms of the first three lines of the *Choephoroe* (1129–31):

Δι. τοῦτον ἐχεις ψέγειν τι; Ἐν. πλεύν ἢ δώδεκα.
Δι. ἄλλ' οδὴ πάντα ταῦτα γ' ἐστ' ἄλλ' ἢ τρία.
Ἐν. ἐκεῖ δ' ἐκαστὸν εἰκοσιν γ' ἀμαρτίας.

Regardless of the validity of Fehling's reconstruction, there are two important points of contact here between Protagoras and Aristophanes: (1) the concentration on the opening of a famous work and (2) the revelation (which Protagoras doubtless presented with ill-concealed triumph) of errors, in fact multiple errors in a single line, which have hitherto escaped the notice of the public.

In connection with this latter point we may note the recurrence of ἀμαρτία or ἀμαρτάνειν (1132, 1135, 1137, 1147): (cf. ἡμαρτήσασαι, DK 80 A 29). What Protagoras seems to have done with the initial lines of the *Iliad*, the most "sophistic" of the tragedians now does with the initial lines of the *Choephoroe*.

3) The following is a condensed and somewhat altered paraphrase of Fehling, *op. cit.*, 214.


That Protagoras employed such techniques receives independent confirmation from the discussion of the Scopas poem of Simonides attributed to him in Plato’s *Protagoras*, 339 a–d, especially 339 a 7–d 9), a passage which Fehling curiously neglects and which we must examine in a different connection later.

The possibility of Aristophanes’ use of Protagoras in 1129–1131 is strengthened by other echoes of Protagorean (or at least Sophistic) criticism in the ensuing scene.

1. Δι. ίδι δή λέγειν, ὅδε μούδοτων ἄλλη ἄξονστα τῶν σῶν προλόγων τῆς ὀρθότητος τῶν ἐπτών (1180–81).

Commentators have often noted that these lines provide a clear allusion to Protagoras’ ὀρθοδοξεία (cf. Cratylus 391 b–c = DK 80 A 24; Phaedrus 267 c = DK 80 A 26; Protagoras 339 a = DK 80 A 25).7)

2. The examination of ἐποπτευεῖν in 1141–43 and of εὐδοκέων in 1182–86 (immediately after the reference to ὀρθότητος τῶν ἐπτών) bears some resemblance to Protagoras’ avowed use of contradiction (ἐὰν εὐνοεῖ λέγειι αὐτῷς αὐτῷ ὁ ποιητής, Protag. 339 b 9–10) and of general ethical criteria drawn from common experience (e.g. Protag. 340 e 5–7) in the specimen interpretation of Simonides.

3. Ἐν. "ἐὰν ἐγένετο αὖθις ἀδιώτατος βροτόν."

Aeschylus’ objection to the use of ἐγένετο is very similar to the point which Socrates, with Prodicus’ help, makes in *Protagoras* 340 c (though of course Plato elaborates this distinction for his own philosophical purposes). This distinction between “to be” and “to become”, however, is invoked to answer Protagoras. We cannot, therefore, say that *Frogs* 1187–88 reflects a Protagorean source. Yet the similarity between Aristophanes and Plato here (as well, perhaps, as Socrates’ appeal to Prodicus) makes it plausible that a Sophistic analysis of poetry along these lines

6) The text is J. Burnet’s *Platonis Opera* (Oxford 1900–7). For a recent discussion and bibliography of the Scopas poem see H. Parry, *TAPA* 96 (1965) 297–320.

underlies both passages. Prodicus is the most obvious candidate, though we must remember that the principle of searching out contradictions originates here with Protagoras (Protag. 339 b–d).

4. The criticism of ήκω ... καὶ κατέχομαι in 1153–57 and κλέεω ἀνοίγω in 1173–74 reflects Sophistic analysis, certainly the synonymics of Prodicus8), whom Aristophanes could naturally think of in the same category as Protagoras9).

The above points render it possible that Frogs 1119–97 actually follows the structure of a work (or works) in which Protagoras interpreted and “destroyed”10) celebrated poets with the weapon of his δόθοσεια. Such a work would have opened with a brilliant demonstration of multiple errors in the well known beginning of a poem, like the demonstration which leaves Socrates dizzy and reeling as from a blow by a good boxer (Protag. 339 e 1–2). It would then have proceeded to a discussion of individual “contradictions” in later sections of the poem (cf. Protagoras, 339 c 1–2, οἴσθα αὐν, ἔφη, ὅτι προοίμιον τοῦ ήγματος λέγει ποι...11). In any case, Protagoras’ concentration on the beginning of poems, attested both by Plato and Aristotle, would have naturally recommended his work to an author preparing a comic literary comparison of prologues. Aristophanes may even have found the idea of analysing the prologues more maliciously attractive because of Protagoras’ work. His parody, then, may refer not only to the two tragedians themselves, but also to the Sophist (or Sophists) whose techniques he is exploiting. The fact that Protagoras had probably been dead for ten years in 405 does not necessarily militate against my argument. Plato’s dialogue is sufficient indication that his memory and his work remained vivid and important to cultured Athenians.

9) Cf. Plato’s mention of Prodicus in connection with ὀνομάτων δόθοσειας, Euthydemus 277 e. It is possible too, though I lay no stress upon it, that καίγωσαν in 1159 may be a reminiscence of Clouds 658–79 (= DK 80 C 3), a passage which parodies Protagoras’ discussion of genders (cf. DK 80 A 26).
11) That Protagoras extended his discussion of poetry beyond the opening lines is shown by the remark of Ammonius on Iliad 21. 240 (DK 80 A 30). This fragment also indicates that Protagoras’ literary studies were not entirely negative or destructive.

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A connection of this nature cannot, of course, be proved definitively, especially when the fifth-century evidence is so scanty. One could also argue (from points 3 and 4 above and from *Euthydemus* 277e = DK 84 A 16) that Aristophanes is drawing upon his own mental amalgam of Protagoras and Prodicus. But were Prodicus uppermost in his mind, one would have expected a more direct parody of his synonymics, such as that which Plato, Aristophanes’ heir in such matters, so deliciously provides in *Protagoras* 337 a–c.

This brief study, in addition, has some bearing on our limited evidence about the historical Protagoras. It strengthens the likelihood that Protagoras’ interpretation of Simonides in Plato’s dialogue may correspond rather closely to actual fact. One may even wonder whether *Protagoras* 338e–339d reflects the same work as that which, according to Aristotle, criticized the proem of the *Iliad*.

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12) [Addendum. R. Pfeiffer’s *History of Classical Scholarship* (see above, note 4), which appeared after the completion of this paper, now provides independent evidence for the historicity of Protagoras’ interpretation of the Scopas poem: see pp. 32–33. Pfeiffer also notes the connection between *Frogs* 1182–88 and *Protagoras* 339b ff, but he refers this kind of criticism to Prodicus rather than Protagoras (p. 40).]

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Αὐτολήκυθος

In a famous passage of his speech against Conon, Demosthenes refers in scathing terms to the activities of the defendant’s sons and of other young men in contemporary Athens: καὶ ἐγὼν ὡς εἶσαι ἐν τῇ πόλει πολλῶς, καλὸν κἀγαθὸν ἀγρᾶν νείες, οἱ παῖςοντες οἱ ἀνθρώποι νέοι σφίων αὐτοῖς ἐκαμνημίας πεποίηται, καὶ καλὸντι τοὺς μὲν ἦθοράλλους, τοὺς δ’ αὐτολήκυθον, ἐφαύτω δ’ ἐξ τοῦτων ἐπαιρῶν τυνὲς... 54. 14.

In the case of ἦθοράλλου, the obscene connotation is unambiguous. Both the context and the formation of the word require it